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PROGRAM All Things Considered STATION WETA Radio NPR Network

DATE April 9, 1985 5:00 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Chinese and Soviet Diplomats Talk

SUSAN STAMBERG: In Moscow, Chinese and Soviet diplomats are beginning their sixth round of normalization talks. This set of discussions started in 1982. Relations between the two Communist powers ruptured in the mid-1960s and the atmosphere has been frigid ever since. But Wendy Lynn reports from Peking that there may now be a crack in the ice.

WENDY LYNN: For the most part, it's Peking that's been the reluctant partner. The Soviets have pressed for friendly gestures, but the Chinese have been firm in their position. No progress can be made, they said, unless and until Moscow removes what's known here as the three obstacles. Those obstacles are the presence of Soviet troops on the northern border with China, Moscow's military intervention in Afghanistan, and the Soviet aid to Vietnamese troops in Cambodia.

But lately the Chinese seem to be softening their stance, and there are definite signs of a thaw. In December, both sides decided to sign long-term agreements on economic, technical and scientific exchanges. And after the death of Konstantin Chernenko, top Communist Party leaders of both countries exchanged warm messages.

Western analysts here say that the Chinese have taken a more pragmatic approach to the Soviets, and there are several reasons why Peking is looking towards warmer ties.

The first is China's preoccupation with its economy. The Chinese stand to make considerable financial gains from trade with the Soviet Union. They're especially eager to bring in Russian expertise to help them upgrade their factories, many of which were originally builtwith the help of the Russians in the

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1950s.

Secondly, China's main military threat is the Soviet Union, and China's entire defense is built around repelling a possible Russian invasion. China can't afford to continue spending its scarce resources trying to keep up with the Soviets. They need their money for their modernization drive. So it would seem to make sense to decrese tensions.

As for the traditional three obstacles, the Chinese insist they haven't backed off, but they have stopped stressing the issue as a precondition to normalization. In fact, the Soviets have been pointing out that the Taiwan issue doesn't seem to be getting in the way of Sino-U.S. relations. They argue that the three obstacles shouldn't necessarily keep Sino-Soviet relations at a standstill, either. The Chinese seem to agree, for the time being.

The Chinese have staunchly maintained that they won't ally with any one country or group of countries. And for that reason, they say the U.S. shouldn't fear a warming trend between the two Communist giants.

For years China has enjoyed a comfortable middle position in the triangle of relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. As long as tensions exist between Washington and Moscow, China will continue to feel free to court both sides.

NOAH ADAMS: The United States is watching this potential thaw in Sino-Soviet relations very carefully. Officials in the Reagan Administration do not believe there's an immediate possibility for major improvement in that relationship, but there is concern in Washington about just where China's softening attitude toward the Soviets might lead.

NPR's Bill Buzenberg has more on the story in this report.

BILL BUZENBERG: We're speaking about the superpower triangle, where any shift in relations among the United States, China, or the Soviet Union can have enormous consequences.

American officials, publicly at least, don't believe the United States has anything to fear from improved Sino-Soviet relations. After all, they say, the United States is trying to improve relations with Moscow itself, now that there is new leadership there.

The number three official at the State Department, Undersecretary of State Michael Armacost, just returned from high-level discussions in Peking and told the Overseas Writers

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Club in Washington today that he's not concerned.

UNDERSECRETARY OF STATE MICHAEL ARMACOST: Looking at the situation, assessing the prospects, it doesn't seem to me this should be cause for great anxiety, nor should we be surprised by efforts to explore the possibility for some improvement in that relationship for both sides.

BUZENBERG: Undersecretary Armacost did acknowledge that the Chinese are taking steps to expand their trade and cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union, as well as other actions. But again, he sees these as maneuvering at the margins.

SECRETARY ARMACOST: There have been some hints of party-to-party connections. But the Chinese themselves certainly assert that they do not anticipate any dramatic changes in the basic contours of the relationship, because the issues which they've referred to in the past as the three obstacles remain, and I don't think they foresee dramatic changes in Afghanistan or Kampuchea, or the disposition of Soviet forces on their border.

BUZENBERG: So, without Soviet concessions, there can be no fundamental improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. The chasm that divides them is still too deep to be bridged.

That, at least, is the official American view. There are those in the Administration, however, who do worry that China is altogether too independent in its foreign policy, that by softening their tough anti-Soviet posture, the Chinese will eventually be able to sit at the apex of the triangle, play off one superpower against the other, and manipulate the United States, rather than the United States playing that role.

Some officials in the Administration are known to be advocating consideration of measures to warn the Chinese not to go too far with the Soviets. Such measures might include slowing down the transfer of American technology to China. Other officials believe any such measures would be counterproductive. But this split does indicate the seriousness with which the Administration views Peking's overtures to Moscow.

Outside analysts say the Chinese are simply testing the new Soviet leaders, trying to reduce the only real military threat China faces, so it can get on with its economic development. None of which should bother Washington.

Former CIA analyst Harry Gelman is now a senior staff member with the Rand Corporation in California.

HARRY GELMAN: A more moderate tone to the Sino-Soviet relationship and the elimination of the possibility of conflict

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is all to the good, as far as we're concerned. As long as the two really do not get very intimate with each other, which I think is hardly likely, I don't think U.S. interests are harmed at all.

BUZENBERG: Gelman says the geopolitical realities still favors the West and a loose Chinese-American strategic relationship, not a Sino-Soviet alliance.

The Chinese may increase their trade with the Soviets, mostly barter trade, and their cultural exchanges to a few hundred, but China had $6 billion worth of trade with the United States last year, and there are now 1200 Americans in China and 13,000 Chinese studying and working in the United States.

GELMAN: Their relationship with the United States is still much, much closer than that with the Soviet Union. And I think I would be very surprised if they moved close, that much closer to the Soviet Union so as to change this fundamental situation.

BUZENBERG: The bottom line, you're saying, here is certainly that there will not be a new strategic realignment within this triangle.

GELMAN: I would be very surprised to see that. I think the Chinese learned their lesson in the '60s with the Soviets. They had -- little brother had its experience with big brother, and they're not going to let it happen again. They're never going to give the Soviets an ascendancy over them.

BUZENBERG: But at the same time, Gelman says, the Chinese believe they can have a more normal relationship with the Soviets, a better atmosphere and more trade, to balance what they have with the rest of the world. That does not mean the kind of close, harmonious ties which worries the United States.

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